

The Craftsman Building





THOUGHTS OCCASIONED BY AN ANNIVERSARY: A PLEA FOR A DEMOCRATIC ART BY GUSTAV STICKLEY



ONE earnestly devoted to a movement in which I have the utmost faith, and to which I have given the best of my life and energies, I am emboldened to advance certain arguments which I believe to be sane and tenable. This I have chosen to do at a milestone of my efforts: that is, on the anniversary of the birth of *The Craftsman*, in which, for three years, I have endeavored to express my personal, specific views—often laboring under the difficulty of fitting a first conception to a tangible, practical reality.

The plea which I am about to make is one for simplicity in all that pertains to the environment of material life under a democracy, where practically all work with either hand or brain; the leisure class being reduced to a minimum.

I was led to my present position of thought by my observations and experiences as a cabinetmaker, arriving at many of the conclusions of William Morris, but reaching them from a direction opposite to the one taken by that great benefactor of society, who was first a thinker and afterward a craftsman. For while I advanced slowly from the fact to the principle underlying the fact, he reasoned broadly from the cause to the effect.

At first, in obedience to the public demand, I produced in my workshops adaptations of the historic styles, but always under silent protest: my opposition developing, as I believe, out of a course of reading, largely from Ruskin and Emerson, which I followed in my early youth. More and more did I resent these imitations which, multiplied to infinity, could not preserve a spark of the spirit, the vivacity, the grace of their originals. Yet even this lack of life was not for me their gravest defect. As I saw them growing beneath the hands of my workmen and afterward displayed in the shops, they did not appear to me more out of place in these, their temporary surroundings, than they did in their final destination, the homes of the people. Everything was there against them. They fitted into no scheme of life, or of decorative art capable of being realized by the persons who had acquired them. Sometimes, indeed, a pretentious, scenic background was prepared for them, but in such cases with what seemed to me a pitiable result of unreality. They had the air of being placed upon a stage, and of awaiting the use and occupancy of persons who, in rented costumes and under assumed names, should recite studied parts.

My impression deepened into a conviction after a European jour-





ney which I made in the interests of my craft. Then, for the first time, I saw the French styles in their proper surroundings, acting as integral parts of palace architecture, as at Versailles; as well as these and all other historical types arranged in their proper sequence at South Kensington, precisely as specimens once having had organic life, are classified in a Museum of Natural History.

In presence of these visible objects, the course which I had long wished to follow, shaped itself clearly before me. I returned home strong in my new faith. I reasoned that as each period is marked by some definite accomplishment or characteristic, so each period must also have its peculiar art; since it is art that holds the mirror up to life and catches its perfect reflection.

In France I had seen a republic attempting to patch with a workman's blouse the old rents made in the web of society by monarchies and empires. In England I had witnessed everywhere the power of the middle classes, in comparison with which the effete nobility appeared as a relic of the past, a pageant as antiquated as the Lord Mayor's Show. In America, as I looked about me with a clearer, keener vision than ever before, I recognized that the salvation of the country lay also with the workers, rather than with the possessors of hereditary culture, or of immense wealth and the power attendant upon it. I realized that the twentieth century, then a few years distant, was to be, like the thirteenth, distinctively an Age of the People. Then the judgment—justified by facts—of a certain critic, upon the work of William Morris, rose in my mind with the compelling force of a battle cry: "He changed the look of half the houses in London, and substituted beauty for ugliness all over the kingdom."

This statement assumed for me the character of a revelation in which the socialism of the reformer clothed itself in a mild, beneficent aspect, expressing the true meaning of the word; becoming a work pursued peacefully for the good of his fellows: a socialism of art—art made homely and brought within the reach of all.

I resolved to make a radical change in the productions of my own workshops, and not to be deflected from my adopted purpose by either obstacle or disappointment.

In making preparations for my new departure, I found others setting out with objects similar to my own. This was to be expected, since the germs of revolution never concentrate in a single locality or a single brain. Reform was in the air, seeking soils favorable to its development.

I resolved to join no factional band, however companionable it might be, in whose members the cause had generated that heat of enthusiasm which is all too liable to produce abortive efforts. I further resolved that I would never again be an imitator, and I set my face toward absolute radicalism. At that time, the revulsion toward simplicity created in America the so-called Dutch, Tyrolean peasant,





and Mission styles; while from the other side of the Atlantic ripples of influence reached us: from France, Belgium, and from Japan as misunderstood by the Europeans. The shop windows of our large cities began to display ill-assorted collections of cabinet-making, ranging from the heavy to the fragile; in many cases showing no understanding on the part of their designer of the physical qualities of the material used; since bamboo was translated into wood, and attempts were made to render the delicate pliability of plant-stems in a hard, resisting medium.

In these collections I saw plain evidences of anarchy, instead of an impulse toward reform. If such examples showed the marks of their release from the rule of the historic styles, they had effected but an exchange of tyrants. They had bartered the tyranny of order for the tyranny of chaos. The modern movement, lacking concentration, squandering its energies upon new imitations, was in danger of defeat and annihilation.

I began to seek remedial measures for adoption in my own workshops. As I thought more closely upon this subject, most important to me; as I studied from both practical and historical points of view, I became convinced that the designers of cabinet-making used their eyes and their memories too freely and their reasoning powers too little. Studying their methods closely, I saw their hands mechanically tracing upon drawing paper familiar lines which recurred to them when they formed the mental picture of a chair or table. For the most part, they too indolently accepted tradition. They did not question or think.

By this means of observation, I was led to the only course of action in which I saw development for myself and future good for my workmen. I cast aside my traditions, forgot the formulas which I had learned years previously, and began to study structural principles; finding them, as I proceeded, the same in architecture, as in the lesser building art of cabinet-making. From the careful examination of the Gothic cathedral I first learned thoroughly the relations between construction and decoration: finding the best examples of the great mediaeval style adequately ornamented by features, which, like the flying buttress, gave them strength and support; finding also the decadence of the art in later specimens wherein these same features were allowed to exceed their functions, and decoration, like a parasitic plant, spread over the fabric to sap and undermine its foundations.

I thus clearly recognized the dangers of applied ornament and advanced a step from which I have never retrograded. I endeavored to turn such structural devices as the mortise and tenon to ornamental use; to employ them in such a way as to force them to give accent and variety to the outlines of the objects in which they occurred.

This lesson of constructive *versus* applied ornament, derived from the Gothic, was supplemented by one of another and yet allied nature,



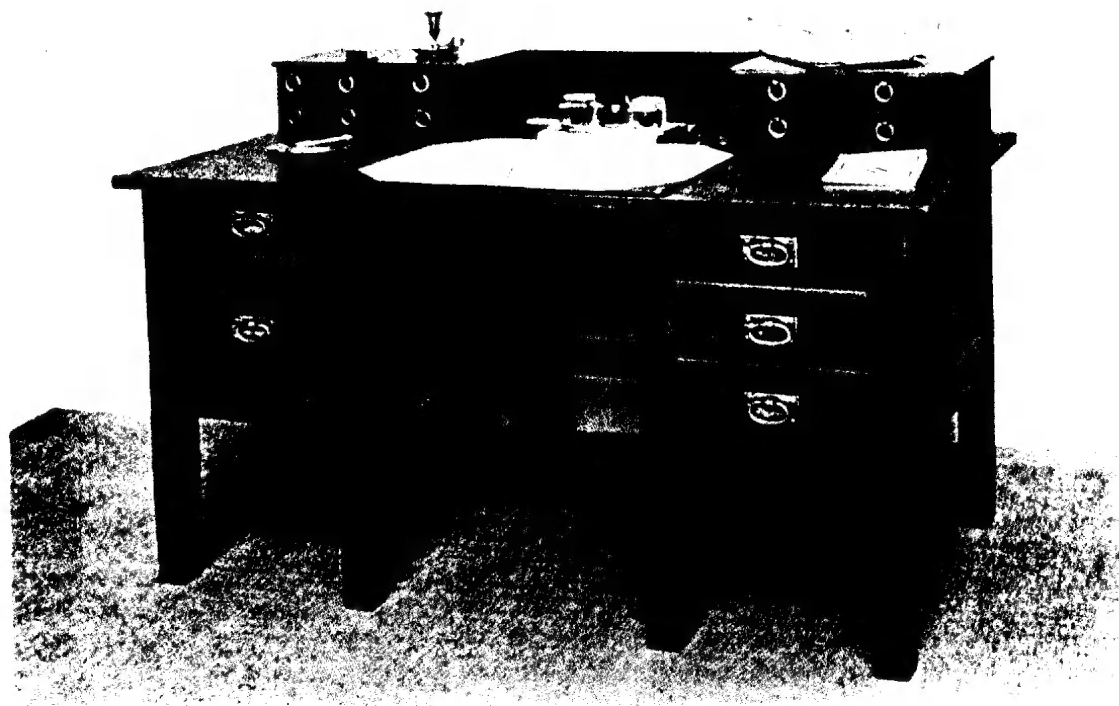
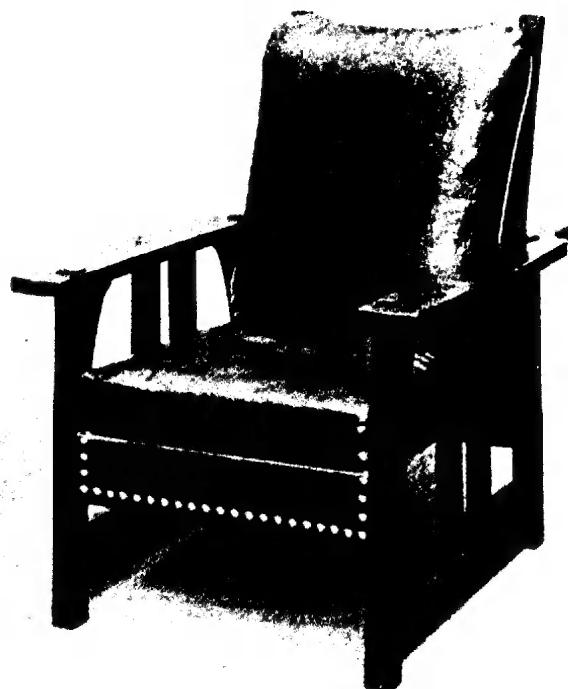


which I found awaiting me in classic architecture. The Greek temples revealed themselves to me as the plainest examples of the structural style. Their plan is a concept of the primitive man, and, even in their most advanced stage of development, the timber construction, so to speak, is never obscured. The columns, with their fluted shafts, recall more vividly than words can do, the boles of forest trees with their grooved bark. The frieze, with its alternate ornamental markings of vertical lines and circles, is but an allusion to the first type of temple, when planks, set on edge, and tree-trunks were hastily assembled to form a sheltering roof over the god, the treasure and the worshipers. In these edifices, however late the period of their erection, the structural quality is never lost, never even greatly obscured to the eye. The principle of construction involved is a question of weight and mass, and from its skilful treatment results a whole, simple enough to be included in a single glance and conveying an impression of harmony and repose. To sum up, one may say that these buildings, accepted as types of beauty by many centuries and civilizations, were primitive—almost crude in plan; that in them the structural idea persisted to the end, clear and dominant; that they were developed and embellished by subtle modifications of line, by the use of beautiful color and diversified material, by ornament arising from necessities of construction and appearing therefore spontaneous and fitting.

Fortified by this second object lesson, I determined to adhere strictly to simplicity of plan; to express construction frankly; above all, to be modern: a resolution which here requires a word of explanation. In order to illustrate my meaning, I will take the example of a bed. This object, when modeled for decorative effect, I often saw raised on a daïs and surrounded by heavy draperies; both of which features are relics of a past time serving no useful end, and being opposed to advanced ideas of cleanliness and health. They formerly protected the bed from cold and dampness; isolating it from its surroundings and creating a focal point of comfort and warmth. Historically, it is interesting to trace the development of this idea of isolation from the cupboard beds of the Brittany peasants up to the great couches of the French monarchs. But the idea has lost its practical value and the devices have no longer a reason for being. The modern bed, on the contrary, should be constructed with a recognition of the necessity of pure air and of the curative power of sunlight.

The principle of this extreme example I found paralleled in the greater part of objects modeled after old types. For this reason I came to regard with distrust any design which suggested historical development. I sought structural qualities only; choosing rather to be reproached—although justly—for crudity, rather than to set out upon a path which could lead nowhere but to the old commonplaces, even though the way should be long and circuitous. But this crudity, as in the case of the temple construction, I regarded as a mere point





CABINET MAKING IN FUMED OAK, BUILT UPON THE SIMPLEST STRUCTURAL LINES, AND DEPENDENT FOR DECORATIVE EFFECT UPON THE COLOR AND SURFACE TREATMENT OF THE MATERIALS EMPLOYED





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of departure from which to develop in certain legitimate directions.

Having now thoroughly assimilated my two lessons: the one relating to plan, the other bearing upon the relations of structure to ornament, I recognized that I had made real progress in my efforts, while I also realized the seriousness of the difficulties which yet lay before me. But I did not falter or waver. The very crudity of my structural plan, as I apprehended it, was to me a proof of its vital power, as well as of a promise of progress, because formlessness never follows hard upon crudeness; because also decadence is the natural sequence of over-refinement.

The greatest of the problems next demanding my attention was how I might afford gratification to the eye, while remaining faithful to my newly adopted structural principles. I felt that the solution of this question lay largely in the proper use of color, but the means to attain this end were not ready to my hand. They awaited development, which was tentative and slow, owing to reasons which I shall explain.

As a cabinet-maker, I was bound to obtain my color-effects largely from wood, aided in some instances by leather and textiles: all of which materials had yet to be adjusted to my structural scheme and thereupon dependent ideas of decoration.

As an American by birth, I chose to work with native growths. I felt the possibilities of our forest products to be great, and I wished to experiment with them; following a desire as spontaneous as that obeyed by the East Indian who carves into designs like wrought iron his heavy, close-grained teak-wood. To speak with all modesty, I determined to treat my chief material by an educative process: in other words, to draw out in it all the potential qualities which I knew it to possess.

One thing I had greatly in my favor. My structural lines made no demands upon the wood which it was not able to meet. They emphasized growth and grain, instead of thwarting them at every turn. They showed that the material was cut and suggested no idea of molding, which should be left to the metal worker. But in order fully to accomplish my object, a long series of experiments confronted me, which now, at the end of several years, I count as only fairly begun. Still, within a comparatively short time, I gained results which more than encouraged me. Through the careful preservation of grain and the development of surface qualities, there resulted beauties which softened the asperities of my outlines: arresting the eye and thereby preventing it from a too rapid seizure of the structural scheme of small objects; by the same means, also, prolonging the interest of the observer and the gratification of his sense of sight. The woods, so treated, invited upon their surface a constant play of light and shade, infinite and never repeated, in studying which I experienced a previously unknown delight, made up of reminiscences of the forest and of





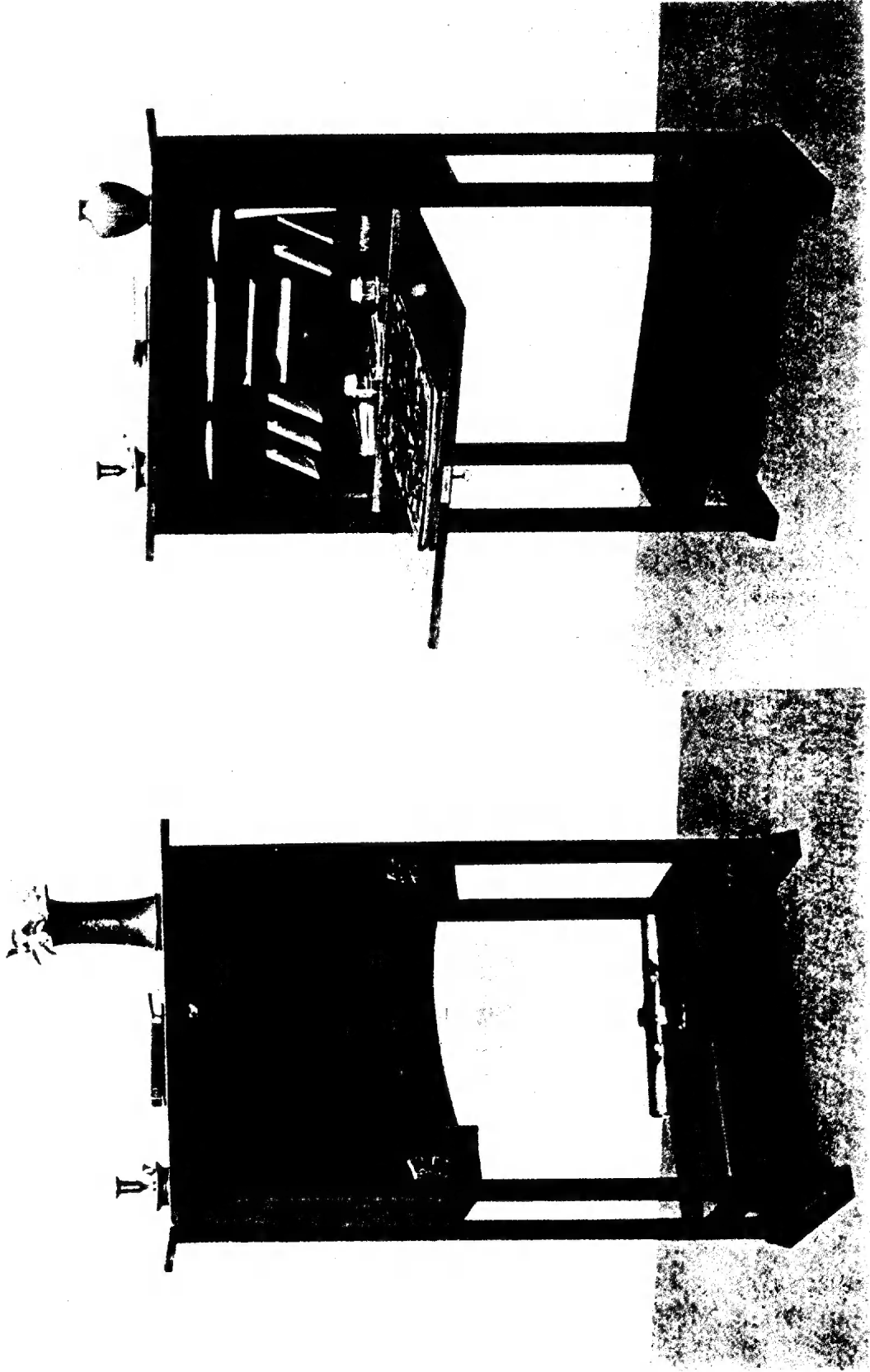
pictures of masters. Encouraged, or rather inspired by this success, I resolved to limit myself to the use of such woods as lay nearest to my use, and to devote much of my energy to expand their qualities and heighten their value. At the same time, my antipathy increased toward the glazes which conceal and obliterate the exquisite work of Nature; actually violating the substances created by the Divine Intelligence and perfected by cycles of years. I realized that the cabinet-maker should receive his material reverently and touch it but to reveal and continue the mysterious and beautiful operations begun in secret, when the wood was yet a living tree.

Having arrived at this point of my labors, I saw attractive glimpses of a path far beyond. My thoughts rose from the lesser to the greater of the building arts. I realized that, in our country, new materials await use and new thoughts development. A youthful enthusiasm for my expanded scheme possessed me, and I reasoned as a moment of exaltation might permit:

"Since the genius of the American is structural, as is proven by his government, his control of natural resources, his mastery of finance, let the building art—the lesser as well as the greater—provide him with surroundings in which he shall see his own powers reflected. In the appointments of his dwelling, let the structural idea be dominant, and the materials employed be, as far as is possible, native products, in order that the scheme may be unified and typical—above all, democratic."

My enthusiasm remained with me, lapsing into a steady courage which tided me over all disappointments. I felt that I was serving the people, in company with many others in various walks of life whom I saw preaching, teaching and practising what I venture to call the gospel of simplicity. In speaking thus strongly, I trust that I shall not be censured as one who over-estimates his own ability, or yet as narrow-minded and wishing to establish one standard of life and art for all sorts and conditions of men. I recognize individuality, the direction given to thought and taste by specific education, the influences exerted by high culture: I admit all these to be beneficial to society. I furthermore acknowledge that luxury and simplicity are comparative, rather than absolute terms, and that they must be judged with the care and seriousness demanded by a question of law. I desire to make clear that I am not constituting myself a critic, or arbiter; that I do not question the conduct or the aestheticism of those whose training, accompanied by wealth, permits them to choose and acquire beautiful objects which, rich in suggestiveness—both artistic and historic—increase for their possessors the pleasures of life. Such persons as these, it is unnecessary to say, are outside the circle of my observation and beyond the need of service other than their own. They constitute a favored minority. They are cosmopolites in the





HAZELWOOD DESK (OPEN AND CLOSED), IN WHICH THE SLENDER PROPORTIONS AND SHARP PROFILE ARE CAREFULLY ADAPTED TO THE DELICATE COLOR EFFECTS OF THE WOOD





true sense—citizens of the world—and entitled from their experience to hold broad views of art and life.

But they in whose interest I make my plea for a democratic household art, constitute the majority of our American people. They are the busy workers, "troubled about many things:" professional people; men and women of business; toilers who reach out after objects of beauty and refinement, as if they were the flowers of a "Paradise Lost." They are the real Americans, deserving the dignity of this name, since they must always provide the brawn and sinew of the nation. They are the great middle classes, possessed of moderate culture and moderate material resources, modest in schemes and action, average in all but in virtues. Called upon to meet stern issues, they have remaining little leisure in which to study problems of other and milder nature. But as offering such great and constant service, these same middle classes should be the objects of solicitude in all that makes for their comfort, their pleasure and mental development. For them art should not be allowed to remain as a subject of consideration for critics. It should be brought to their homes and become for them a part and parcel of their daily lives. A simple, democratic art should provide them with material surroundings conducive to plain living and high thinking, to the development of the sense of order, symmetry and proportion.

This plea is certainly inspired by a practical idea, for aesthetic influences are daily gaining wider recognition as factors of usefulness. It is acknowledged that form and color appeal to the senses with imperious force, which is the more compelling because of its very silence. Words are forgotten in their rapid succession; the impression of personal contact wears away; but a significance exists in the individuality of material things which is comparable with human character. We are brought into daily relations with people whom we feel to be honest, inspiring, depressing, or dangerous. Their influences upon us are inexplicable and subtle, but yet they direct and compel us toward good or evil. They give us pleasure or pain. It is the same with material things. To illustrate the influence of structural form, we have but to revert to the two great examples which I have already used: the Gothic architecture, with its pyramidal effects, uplifts us and sweeps us away, as it were with a flame of enthusiasm; the Greek, on the contrary, settles us in our surroundings with a feeling of reliance and ease, as we note the harmony, the delicate balance, created by its verticals and horizontals. It matters not whether these principles are shown in large or in small, in open-air, or in interior architecture. Indeed, the small things are always with us, they are our constant companions, not too good for "human nature's daily food," and, therefore, we are subject to them. Non-structural objects, those whose forms present a chaos of lines which the eye can follow only lazily or hopelessly, should be swept out from the dwell-





ings of the people, since, in the mental world, they are the same as volcanoes and earthquakes in the world of matter. They are creators of disorder and destruction. The shapes of things surrounding the working members of society should carry ideas of stability and symmetry in order to induce a correspondence of thought in those to whose eyes they present themselves. They should not picture the world in a state of flux.

The tranquil environment demanded by work and thought, and supplied by art is admirably exemplified in the mural painting of Puvis de Chavannes, in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, where the figure of the lecturer, projected against the straight, slender boles of the trees of the Sacred Wood assumes the charm of mystery and thus makes willing listeners of the students.

In taking leave of this branch of my subject I can not too strongly insist upon the influence of material form over mental mood, as inspiring hope, courage, good humor and their attendants, or, on the contrary, as generating the opposites of these lubricators of the wheels of life. I insist that the people and, above all, the children of the people, should be afforded the advantages of a democratic art: one that should insure the comfort and the beauty of their homes and by this means decrease the resistance which they unconsciously make against their surroundings. To accomplish this much-to-be-desired end, the school and the workshop must unite their forces. The public schools must teach art practically: analyzing form and structure, treating them for their own sakes, and not as matters of historical development. The workshop must give the practical demonstration of these principles in the products which they send out, and thus an educative process will be furthered which, in the end, can not fail to create a public a sound in judgment, as just in criticism, as were the Greeks, the Florentines, the French, German and Flemish burghers of the Middle Ages: a result inevitable in any country or period in which art is truly democratic.

But I must not omit to add an earnest plea for the education of the color-sense, as yet undeveloped to a regrettable degree among the people. This sense it is which makes the poor man rich to abundance; for riches, rightly understood, are but the possession of the faculty for enjoyment. The eye to be soothed, or to be excited to pleasure, has but to turn to the outside world. It is thence that the art which seeks to be educative, must draw its lesson, rather than from the secondary sources provided by the sciences of physics and chemistry. And once again for a precedent we must turn to Puvis de Chavannes, whose retina was said to be developed beyond that of any other known individual of the nineteenth century. For that reason his color-combinations appeal less strongly to the eye of the peasant than those of the other modern French masters of decoration. But in his selections the teachings of Nature may be read as in an open book. His dark verdure-tones, so prominent wherever he laid his hand to a wall,





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repeat the intention of the Universal Mother, who clothed the trees in that same color, that they might soothe the tired human eye and brain with what a great Italian has named their "divine green silence." The air-blues of M. Puvis are those which the Greeks did not recognize as color, since they regarded them as atmospheric effects due to mass and density, rather than to inherent quality. His violets are such tones as pass absolutely unnoticed by the infant and the savage who, at the sight of reds, are provoked to laughter and seized with the desire of possession.

By this illustration I have sought to explain to how great a degree I believe the success of democratic art is dependent upon the educative use of color. And further, as a proof of the sound basis of my belief, I will point once more to William Morris, whose revolution in decorative art, regenerating not only England, but the world, was successful largely through his refined use of the gamut of color-notes. Refinement in the specific sense, like that shown by Morris and Puvis, is urgently demanded among us for the advancement of art, and the more complex refinement of the English craftsman will be, perhaps, the better guide, until we shall have simplified our vision sufficiently to enjoy the primitive refinement of the French painter. But let the work be hastened! Vulgarity in color cries out with strident voice from public and private interiors, from the workshop, and the window of the merchant. To substitute for this harshness the clear, pure note of a beneficent, sympathetic and truly democratic art should be the strenuous purpose alike of artists, educators and producers.

IT may appear that I have abandoned the plain tale of my experiences to wander widely in the field of speculation. But in so doing I have sought only to indicate the benefit which personally I have derived from my self-appointed lessons, and to express my belief that were the principles underlying them diffused among the people, they would accomplish much moral and aesthetic good. I may further acknowledge that this very desire led me to found *The Craftsman*, in October, 1901, when my experiments in my own craft had reached a stage of development which permitted me a degree of leisure. As I set myself to prepare the initial number, it seemed most fitting to me that this should be devoted to William Morris, whose example of courage in radical and lonely experiment had sustained me through the trials of my modest undertaking. Therefore, this number appeared as practically a monograph dealing with the patron saint of "integral education" from the different points of view of art, socialism, business affairs and friendship. By this publication I sought to honor an abstract principle in which I was interested to the limit of my energies and resources, as well as to pay homage to one of the strongest Anglo-Saxon heroes of the nineteenth century.

In the succeeding number it remained for me to satisfy the claims





of a more personal and intimate gratitude. I therefore devoted the second issue to an appreciation of John Ruskin, the writer whose exaltation, or rather, divine madness, awakened within me, in the days of my early youth, ambitions to which I have never proved recreant.

Having liquidated these moral debts, I felt myself free to proceed to develop the magazine from a monograph to a periodical composed of writings which, while diversified in both subject and treatment, should yet offer a consistent, unified whole; which should teach the lessons, in my judgment so desirable to propagate, without trace of fatiguing pedantry. This scheme I found difficult to realize, and my new enterprise, although one of my most cherished undertakings, weighed heavily upon me. For while, in my craft-experiments, my work and myself were the only factors with which I had to deal, I had here to struggle with the unknown quantity of the public. But indications quickly proved to me that my premises were correct ones, and that I was again advancing, although with necessary slowness, to the solution of another self-set problem. Worthy exponents of modern thought and of the new art acknowledged the sincerity of my efforts by offering to lend their names and pens to the columns of *The Craftsman*; while the press and the public were quick to apprehend the trend of my labor as an aspiration toward a democratic art. Especially may this be said of numerous eminent educators who have aided me with their wise counsel, as well as of artists in general, and of the officers of public and private cultural societies, one of whom, as a labor inspired by enthusiasm and friendliness, prepared the scheme for the articles upon certain phases of municipal art, begun in the issue of January, 1904, and to be continued until the end of the year.

A discussion of the wilful and somewhat dangerous tendencies shown by the modern decorative art of the continent, opened early in the life of the magazine by Professor Hamlin of the architectural department of Columbia University, attracted much attention abroad; the very sponsor of the term "*L'Art Nouveau*," M. S. Bing of Paris, deeming the arguments published of sufficient weight to demand his own explanation of the origin and significance of the movement.

Upon occasion, liberal space has been devoted to illustrations and descriptions of the smaller and finer objects of industrial art; as, for example, the jewelry of M. René Lalique, who by force of his genius, has placed himself among the first artists of France, and whose productions are honored in the Gallery of the Luxembourg side by side with the most celebrated modern canvases.

Thus, while gradually increasing the number of the classes of subjects treated in the magazine, I have sought to do this strictly in accordance with my first idea of the enterprise: for, at the beginning, my purpose was to publish any writing which might increase public respect for honest, intelligent labor; advance the cause of civic improvement; diffuse a critical knowledge of modern art, as shown in

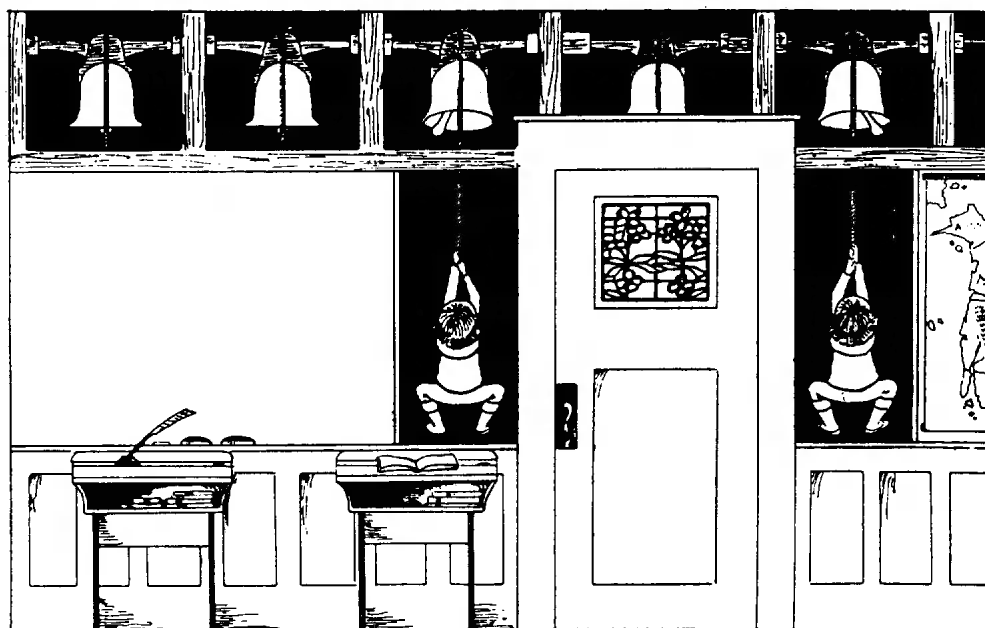




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its most characteristic examples chosen from the fine, decorative, or industrial divisions; advocate the "integral education," or in other words, the simultaneous training of hand and brain; and thus help to make the workshop an adjunct of the school.

Throughout the existence of *The Craftsman* I have sought with great zeal, unflinching purpose and perfect modesty, to benefit the people. In the future I shall not relax my efforts.



I DO not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few. No, rather than art should live this poor, thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with rather than this, I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile, as I said before I thought it possible she might do; rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark.

WILLIAM MORRIS IN
"THE LESSER ARTS."

